

”Comedy is the future of politics”

POLITICS AS CONFECTIONS?
Political humour and humour as a political weapon in Finnish popular publicity

Introduction

My presentation focuses on the following question: What is the role of humour in making sense of politics in Finnish popular publicity, especially in the political satire *Itse valtiaat*? *Itse valtiaat* is a popular animation, in which politics and politicians are discussed by the means of humour. It has been broadcast since 2001. My focus is especially on the presidential elections of 2006 which were discussed in the serial in advance, afterwards and in tandem with. As my research is at its early stage I examine the question in relation to three contexts: 1) the “entertainmentisation” of politics, 2) the earlier research traditions and 3) the Finnish popular publicity.

The presentation is connected to my ongoing research on political humour and humour as a political weapon in Finnish popular publicity. The research material of my doctoral thesis consists of the serial *Itse valtiaat* and the interpretations given to this animation. The study belongs to the area of media research, and it is a part of the multidisciplinary research project *Rethinking the Popular. Changes in Finnish Publicness and Relocations of Cultural Power in 1960–2010* (2004-2010).

Confections on a plate?

The starting points of this presentation are popular publicity as a central social practice (cf. Jones 2005, 30), and cultural symbols and media representations as a sphere for political debates. In spite of its centrality popular publicity has been little researched in Finland (Koivunen & Lehtonen 2005, 22). My research focuses on the relation between politics and entertainment with a special emphasis on humour in Finnish popular publicity. My research material consists of the animation *Itse valtiaat* which is a political satire with a great store of references to popular culture in general.

The “entertainmentisation” of politics is a very visible phenomenon in the contemporary media culture and inseparable from the current political processes. The “entertainmentisation” of politics and the politicization of popular culture are products of the same developing trend and thus partially reverse sides of the same coin. In contrast to general conception, politics and entertainment have a tight interactive relation. Politics have always included entertaining elements. Politics is a certain kind of a drama and thus connected to an entertaining function. (Jones 2005, 8) In the last decade there has been a revolutionary breakthrough in the field of political television as the union of politics and popular culture illustrates a fundamental shift in the production of political television production, and politics and entertainment can no longer be separated from each other (see *ibid*, 5, 11). *Itse valtiat* illustrates this shift in the Finnish context as its starting time (2001) goes hand in hand with the breakthrough over the “entertainmentisation” of politics.

The tight connection between politics and entertainment is not limited to popular culture. Humour is also used in “rational politics”, and the comedian Jeremy Hardy has called comedy “the future of politics” (Wagg 2002, 327). The traditional research in political science is still strongly tied with rational politics, and for example research on the rhetoric or images is not necessarily considered relevant or possible (cf. Rättilä 1999, 57). The role of popular culture is significant in both defining politics and in the relationship between citizens and politics, and should not be underestimated or ignored (cf. Jones 2005, 13). Additionally, the popular conceptions of politics are based on television programmes in our mediated society (cf. Karvonen 2004). *Itse valtiat* can also be viewed as political hyper-reality – it can feel more familiar and thus more real than the actual political actors and actions. Citizens do not differentiate their practices of citizenship into “information” somewhere over there and “entertainment” somewhere here (Jones 2005, 31).

In the current television production, politics is wrapped up in several forms and genres besides news and documentaries (see *ibid*, 4). Satire and parody could be seen as the popular confectionary wraps of politics: The topic of my presentation, *Politics as confections?*, refers to the debate about entertaining political programmes. The metaphor of confections illustrates both the negative and the positive qualities associated with the developing trend. Political entertainment programmes have been criticized for serving up “confections” instead of “vegetables” (“serious” political talk) to the audience (see *ibid*, 70). The critics have tended to believe that humour trivializes political talk (*ibid*, 58). On the one hand *Itse valtiat* could be seen as “confections”, which trivialize political

processes, stereotype politicians and turn politics into easily chewed spectacles for its wide audience.

On the other hand, the title refers to the by now dismissed possibility: Entertaining political programmes may add interest in politics and thus work as inviting “confections”. The cultural representations in the field of popular culture may also activate the pursuit of policies. Jeffrey P. Jones reminds that popular culture is as capable in shaping and supporting civic culture as it is capable in shaping and supporting consuming culture. (ibid, 32) The metaphor of confections also includes the question about activating the pursuit of policies and developing interest in politics. Could *Itse valtiat* be viewed as a political confection that makes the mouth water?

Researchers in political science have criticized the connections between politics and entertainment. Entertainment is said to have an injurious effect on democracy but there are no proper findings over that (ibid, 8). The criticism that the animation series has received can also be located among the overall criticism of television: Jones reminds us that television has been accused of having a negative effect on politics almost since television started (ibid, 15). In *Itse valtiat*, the power is concentrated on institutional politics and citizens are absent. This may strengthen the citizens’ defamiliarization with politics, since the vitality of democracy is diminishing (ibid). On the other hand, the language in the entertaining political programmes is more popular than in many traditional political talk shows, whose audiences got tired of their elite-centred political discourse (see ibid, 41, 48). Entertaining programmes like *Itse valtiat* thus make sense of politics by using popular language.

Politics and humour

The subtitle of my presentation *Political humour and humour as a political weapon in Finnish popular publicity* sums up the two following approaches to humour. Firstly, my research data consists of the Finnish political satire *Itse valtiat* which can be classified as political humour. The action is set in the Parliament House which is one of the best known visual symbols of institutional power in Finland. The characters are mostly ministers, party leaders or other Finnish political “insiders”. The President of the Republic Tarja Halonen also has a significant role in the serial.

The former presidents Mauno Koivisto and Martti Ahtisaari are permanent characters as well. The plots of the serial are connected to politics and current political events. The chronological order of the serial follows the political agenda too.

Secondly, humour also has its politicizing, subversive and emancipatory dimensions and can thus be used as a political weapon. Humour certainly has repressive and trivializing aspects as well. The “polemical edge” of parody has been discussed and questioned in several theoretical debates in art studies (see e.g. Dentith 2000, 155-156; Jameson 1991, 17), as has also the “critical edge” of irony (see e.g. Dentith 2000, 17-18, 37, 156; Hutcheon 1994, 4, 105). Linda Hutcheon examines irony as a subversive and resisting political strategy in her work *Irony's Edge* (1994), but for example Fredric Jameson claims that there is no parody in its traditional meaning anymore. In his work *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) he writes that inane pastiche has taken the place of polemic parody during the post-modern period. Several theorists have claimed that his definition is too extreme. Simon Dentith, for example, reminds in his work *Parody* (2000) that polemic can not be the one and only definition for parody; and Judith Butler writes that parody is used politically in drag, aiming at exposing the illusion of original gender (Butler 1990, 146).

However, researchers of aesthetic political science have simultaneously claimed humour and jesting to be channels for political protesting (see for ex. Kulynych 1997). The subversiveness of humour is frequently used in cultural and political jamming. Cultural jamming refers to action against supranational companies, whereas political jamming refers to action against political ideologies, parties, political institutions etc. (Cammaerts 2005). Cultural jamming is also political (ibid.), and hence it is more connected to the politics of consumption than for example party politics: For example subvertisements can be classified as cultural jamming as they include an anti-marketing message. In any case, cultural and political jamming illustrates the “critical edge” of humour in contemporary culture.

Instead of the “critical edge” of humour I am interested in the “political edge” of humour. The “political edge” of humour is not actually discussed in art studies, but Juri Mykkänen classifies both satire and parody as styles of political carnival (Mykkänen 2004, 91). However, carnival (at least in the Bahtinian sense) is routine and one could speak of automated humour that ends up losing its edge. Jeffrey P. Jones also examines parody as a tool of political criticism (Jones 2005, 126-127).

Party politics in colour

Itse valtiat is published by the Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE and produced by Filmitoimisto Oy. The screening date is on Saturday evening, which is a traditional prime time for political comedy in the Finnish television and especially in the channel YLE1. The repeat broadcast is also timed on Saturday, but takes place at morning and is situated between a “serious” political talk show *Lauantaiseura* and the news. In the context of Finnish publicity, the channel YLE1 profiles as a sphere for national, economical, scientific and high cultural elite publicity (Koivunen & Lehtonen 2005). The serial is herein a “legitimized” satire. It could be seen as associating with “the good taste” and political documentary, following the channel profile.

The idea concerning the “political edge” of humour is recognisable in several interpretations given to the animation. The “political edge” of humour may function by criticizing or controlling politics or political issues, mocking politicians etc. *Itse valtiat* is a very popular serial, but for example the former Coalition Party leader Ville Itälä has claimed that the serial has ruined his public image and credibility to act as a party leader. Also the Youth League of the Coalition Party has protested against the public presentation of *Itse valtiat*, arguing that Coalition Party politicians are represented in a negative way in the serial. It has been claimed in the leading article of the centrist journal *Suomenmaa*, that *Itse valtiat* vilifies the Centre Party in particular. Most of the public criticism comes from the right wing, although The President of the Republic Tarja Halonen (the Finnish Social Democratic Party) has noticed that there are some non-existing conflicts represented in the serial. In total, the reactions speak of the significance of the serial to the current political field.

The focus in *Itse valtiat* is on domestic policy. The most popular and largest Finnish political parties are included in the serial. In total there are 19 registered parties in Finland. Eight of them have representatives in the Parliament and three of them in the Finnish Cabinet. The following parties are frequently represented in the serial and have at least one permanent character occurring in the serial: The Finnish Social Democratic Party (FSD), The Centre Party (CP), The Coalition Party (CO), The Left Alliance (L), The Green League of Finland (G) and The Christian Democrats (CD). The parties do not actually co-operate in the serial, as the only exception is the network of

female politicians. The politicians from different parties meet mainly in the fictional confessional of the Parliament, but only because the Speaker of the Parliament Paavo Lipponen (FSD) pretends to be a priest. The Swedish People's Party (SPP) is in the very margins of *Itse valtiat* although it is a Cabinet party and had its own candidate in the presidential elections. The True Finns (TF) have no representatives in the serial although it has three Members of the Parliament.

The differences between the parties are articulated by the means of the visual. These visual solutions also produce and underline party contradictions. Colours are traditional political symbols and very significant when symbolizing differences: Even the wall colours of the Parliament House vary while representing distinct parties. The party backgrounds of the characters are also illustrated by using different colours. The ties or the clothes are painted red (FSD, L), blue (CO, CD) or green (CP, G). Red symbolizes the left wing and blue the right wing, but green is used for signifying both the Centre Party and the Green League. The distinction between the CP and the G is produced by using simple visual symbols. It is known that the Centre Party is mainly supported in the provincial areas so there are always some hay bales in the background while representing the CP office. A straw hat is also a popular visual symbol of the CP.

Including and excluding politicians

The politicians have lost their titles to the *Itse valtiat* characters which are all represented as caricatures. This stereotypes the politicians, but in different ways. The caricatures differ in degree, as the other politicians are ridiculed by exaggerating their personal traits, the others by drawing them quite unlike themselves (cf. Rose 1995, 57). Adapting and altering politicians are practices of power. Adapting could be viewed as a practice of sympathy, closeness and approval, but altering is a practice of distance and making a difference. It could also be claimed that more power is practiced when creating an "unlike character" than when drawing an exaggerated one.

Including politicians in *Itse valtiat* could be seen as a form of applause. It is said that a prerequisite for getting success in politics is getting success in the media (see e.g. Isotalus 1998). Power and politics are thus articulated in the practices of including and excluding politicians. The repertoire of characters does not correlate with those highlighted in other popular publicity in Finland. For example, the Member of Parliament Tony Halme (The True Finns) is a well-known person in

Finland and appears occasionally in the yellow press. He is a former professional boxer and has gained publicity during his representative period by using drugs, having a drinking problem and shooting a gun in his residence. In the sphere of *Itse valtiat* he does not exist – which implies that he is not a serious politician. Selections like this also profile the serial by producing difference between the yellow press (where Halme is included) and the serial (where he is excluded) which follows the channel profile.

Another known Member of Parliament, Anni Sinnemäki (The Green League), is a former popular songwriter and a very young politician. She appears regularly in *Itse valtiat* – in fact, more often than the party leader Tarja Cronberg. This implies that she is a politician to be taken seriously and including her does not undermine the political quality of the serial. Cronberg for her part is included but she is represented as a giant green potato. Visually her character is the most altered and stereotyped. The green potato emphasizes her position as an unripe political potato, as she became the party leader only two months after joining the Green Party. The political edge of humour is here a very explicit one.

The themes or plots in the serial also follow more the actual political events than the gossip ventilated in the tabloids. For example, the private lives of the politicians are only slightly included. There are some notions of family relations, but only Pentti Arajärvi, the husband of the President of the Republic Tarja Halonen, is included as a character in *Itse valtiat*.

The presidential frame

The presidential elections of 2006 were held in the beginning of this year. The first round took place on the 15th January and the second round on the 31st January. The then President of the Republic Tarja Halonen (FSD) won the elections. In real life, there were eight candidates in the elections. The Finnish Social Democratic Party, The Centre Party, The Coalition Party, The Green League of Finland, The Christian Democrats, The Swedish People's Party and the True Finns had their own candidates. There was also one independent nominee.

The candidates of The Finnish Social Democratic Party (FSD), The Centre Party (CP) and The Coalition Party (CO) are permanent characters in *Itse valtiat*. The President of the Republic Tarja

Halonen (FSD) has been in the serial since its beginning in 2001 when she already was the president. She is represented as a quite temperamental lady, but as a real leader too. Her speech defect is underlined in the serial. She is also the only politician, whose spouse has his own character in the serial. During the election campaign of 2006 FSD politicians produced a rap video, aiming at support their candidate. In the fictional rap battle of *Itse valtiat* Halonen performs herself and asks voters to “Give me another six years.” She also explains her participation by using her campaign slogan *The president of the whole nation*.

Sauli Niinistö (CO) is the vice-president of the European Investment Bank and has also been in the serial since its beginning. Based on a voting at the official homepage of *Itse valtiat* he is the most popular character in the serial. Niinistö himself comments his character very alike – although more handsome. According to Niinistö, he and his character both are nimble, a bit impatient, strong-willed and fast – especially in roller-skating. In the serial Niinistö has skates on even in a fictional political talk show. When CO politicians hear about the rap battle they decide to buy the best public rap image for Niinistö which refers to his very successful and daring election campaign: The advertising agency Bob Helsinki created the famous slogan *The president of the working population* for this right wing candidate. In the rap Niinistö argues, that “He is the right man”.

Matti Vanhanen (CP) is the Prime Minister of Finland and a permanent character in *Itse valtiat* since the 6th period. He is represented as a quite shy and insecure man, who stammers at every turn. Vanhanen is described as a “grey” prime minister in the Finnish media, and there are some ironic comments over these descriptions. When he laughs, he comments that “normally I laugh only at weather reports”. In other words, *Itse valtiat* produces some self irony on his behalf. His height is a reason for many jokes. In a fictional rap battle the nickname *50 Cent of the Centre Party* is given to him. The nickname includes an intertextual reference to popular culture as 50 Cent is a famous rap artist. However, in the serial it is claimed to be both the difference in length between Vanhanen and another CP minister Mauri Pekkarinen and the value of the public image of Niinistö.

All the other candidates are excluded: For example when the FSD politicians consult a real time support indicator during the election there are only three pillars: the red one referring to Halonen, the blue one referring to Niinistö and the green one referring to Vanhanen. Only three campaign slogans are repeated in the serial and included in the dialogue. Only the three candidates participate

in the rap battle. Päivi Räsänen, Member of Parliament (CD), also participates in the battle, but she is not a candidate and her rap is a moral rap about fertilization treatment.

Summary

Politics are highly personified (see for ex. Isotalus 1998) and also *Itse valtiat* follows this developing trend: it focuses on politicians, and the “political edge” of humour is more targeted to politicians than to the matter-of-fact politics. Politics are highly personified also in the frame of presidential elections. On the other hand, this humanizes the political institutions and/or political power (cf. Jones 2005, 122).

Itse valtiat controls access to Finnish popular publicity for its own part. Only the ministers, party leaders and presidents have access to the fictional world of the serial – with only a few exceptions. *Itse valtiat* may strengthen the status of the included politicians, as imitation can be examined as a tribute (cf. Dentith 2000, 18): Imitation connotes that the target of mockery is worth ridiculing. As the Swedish People’s Party or the True Finns politicians are not included at all, the serial also marginalizes particular politicians and parties.

Itse valtiat also regulates the public agenda by trivializing, criticizing or signifying political events and has thus a “watchdog function”. On the other hand, *Itse valtiat* is a serial and the fictional plots and events are much based on repeats. This produces for the most part automated humour that ends up losing its edge. The “political edge” of humour is not a very sharp one as the criticism is impending. However, repeats and automated humour may function as a narrative which makes sense of politics (cf. Jones 2005, 14).

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